Under Construction

Anson, Chris M, Farris, Christine

Published by Utah State University Press

Anson, Chris M and Christine Farris.
Under Construction.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9317.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9317

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=202051
As a field of professional inquiry intertwined with the practice and teaching of its own subject, composition studies has enjoyed the steady pace of its own recent evolution. Few composition scholars twenty years ago would have imagined the rate at which the field is now developing, exploding beyond its boundaries, creating new alliances, and locating new sites for inquiry and knowledge production. These current transformations owe in part to the inevitable burgeoning of a theoretically interdisciplinary field with a strong orientation toward self-reflection. They also owe to unprecedented changes underway in higher education, changes pressured by shifts in the politics and economics of university administration, the advent of new technologies, population changes that affect student demographics, and the creation of alternative structures and contexts for teaching and learning.

Composition, in seeking a disciplinary identity, is questioning the ways it creates and mediates knowledge and the ways in which that knowledge informs and is informed by various contexts for research and practice. This collection focuses on the ways in which composition reconsiders established dichotomies, examines new connections among areas of inquiry, and suggests avenues for inquiry that have transformative consequences for the sites of theory, research, and teaching.

When we first proposed this volume of essays, we sought submissions that reconsidered the relationship among theory, research and practice, expecting that our focus would primarily be on the changing face of composition research. Our open call and invitation to individual scholars, however, resulted in very few reports of research studies, but rather in contributions that reflect the extent to which the theory/research/practice relationship now occupies our disciplinary thinking.

Since the publication of Stephen North’s The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field (1987), the past decade has seen attention to research methodology largely displaced by conflict between theory and practice. This conflict, still rooted, one might argue, in the desire for a unified theory, often centers on the extent to which any theory employed by compositionists must grow, if not from research, then from practice, or at least
have direct pedagogical implications. While North sought to recuperate the contributions of practitioners, his characterization of their knowledge as “lore” and their relationship to scholars as a power struggle has contributed to an anxious debate among compositionists. Joseph Harris (1994, 1997), reflecting the view of many in the field, finds it necessary to declare that the composition classroom remains at the center of his concerns and that theory (“how knowledge gets made”) only interests him insofar as it influences practice (x).

On the other hand, Sidney Dobrin argues in his recent book, *Constructing Knowledges*, that “theory can exist without practical applications” (152). Our authors’ reconsiderations, located all along this continuum, have enabled us to put together a collection that questions disciplinary hierarchies and values new practices as scholarship at the same time that it questions their capacity for building disciplinary knowledge and identity. It is our aim that this collection not dichotomize, privilege, or balance the three terms in the composition theory/research/practice “equation.”

The contributions to this volume reflect how much the field has changed since the two of us first entered it in the late 1970’s, a time often characterized as a “paradigm shift” away from the analysis of well-written products toward interest and intervention in the writing process. It was a time when a number of compositionists, influenced by work in cognitive development psychology, sought a universal model of the writing process presumably shared by effective writers. Particularly those who sought disciplinary status for composition embraced the notion that knowledge about writing and the teaching of writing was made and validated through empirical studies. Suspicion of quantitative research and universal knowledge-making has since resulted in composition specialists’ investigation of new venues and local conditions in which writing is practiced and taught as well as the reestablishment of links with historical, textual, and cultural inquiry in the rest of English studies.

Oversubscription to the “paradigm shift” narrative, however, presumes either a linear progression from current-traditionalism to social constructionism or a hierarchical tension among North’s scholars, researchers and practitioners that has never been that simple—not then, when the two of us, in the span of less than a decade, could have been found theoretically embracing the ideas of Freire, Moffett, and Burke; teaching freewriting and journals alongside the cumulative sentence or the Toulmin scheme; or conducting research using everything from T-units to thick description. Nor is the identity secure or the struggle over now, when, in this volume, one author can make the case that our disciplinary authority is slipping away as empirical methodology loosens (MacDonald), while another argues for the absence of any safe house for knowledge-making outside of the vexed political gatekeeping position that composition occupies in English departments and institutions (Vandenberg).

Tied to its quest for disciplinary legitimacy, composition studies has sought but never achieved a coherence made possible by a unified theory. While hardly
the empirical-privileging scrutinizers of composition research studies of earlier decades (e.g., Braddock, et al. 1963), compositionists such as James Berlin, Stephen North, and Louise Phelps have nevertheless decried the contradictory theories reflected in the practices of composition teachers. Despite North’s characterization of composition as a battleground, no one brand of research, as Beth Daniell has pointed out, has managed to win out and unify all the knowledge of composition that we have accumulated using different theories (129).

Reluctant to assume a top-down, research-to-theory-to-practice relationship, compositionists increasingly claim to favor some sort of a dialectical relationship between theory and practice. Often drawn from hermeneutics or a Freirean notion of praxis, the assumption is that teachers’ critical reflection on their actual practice enables them to construct an ever-changing theory while in the process of changing that practice (Ferry, this volume). Zebroski complicates the dialectical view by arguing in this volume that theory can be viewed as one of several practices which interact and are affected by related writing, teaching, curricular, and disciplinary practices. Grimm, Wysocki and Cooper also argue that research is not a product, but a set of practices, whose evaluation must include the effects on those studied. Nevertheless, like Wendy Bishop, they experiment with different written representations of their research and discuss the critical perspectives made possible by that experimentation. This notion that theory, research, and teaching are all practices providing a location from which to view and critique the others is one that appeals to us in constructing this volume and one which offers a way out of battling binaries.

The shift in theoretical perspective from author-as-subject to an acknowledgment of multiple subject positions and the resulting increase in context-specific literacy and pedagogy research have called into question the possibility of a coherent theory of composition. Compositionists’ knowledge-making activity is increasingly bound up in context and self-reflexivity rather than in a quest for models that will tell us the best way to produce “good writing” or the most effective teachers of writing.

In resisting objective and neutral methodologies, more and more composition scholars are theorizing their own positions, questioning assumptions underlying traditional scholarship, and interrogating uses of research that would conceal problematic power relations between researchers and subjects (Bleich 179). As Kirsch and Ritchie encourage, the research itself increasingly includes investigation of what has shaped the researcher’s perspectives and an acknowledgment of “what is contradictory, and perhaps unknowable” (9). Many of the authors in this volume (Rose and Lauer; Chiang; Grimm, et al.; Okawa) build into their essays acknowledgement of their positions as scholars and researchers and examine their “findings” as cultural and ideological products. At that same time, some of them are quick to point out the limits and consequences of new theories and methodologies for composition as a disciplinary community (Seitz; MacDonald; Neff; Ray and Barton).
Increasingly, compositionists have more confidence in the recognition that teaching makes knowledge, and that practice, overdetermined as it is, continually calls into question the traditional purpose of theory—to explain unaccounted-for phenomena and solve new problems. Lore, as North distinguishes it from traditional disciplinary knowledge production, can, Harkin argues, be thought of as postdisciplinary theory, because it allows for practitioners’ often contradictory attempts to solve writing problems with more than one cause, rather than using theory in the traditional way to contain situations (134).

Beth Daniell has argued that while composition theories may lack the authority to dictate pedagogy, as rhetoric, they are what persuade us to teach writing in the ways that we do (130). At the same time that theories may contain the discipline by “serving the interests of . . . groups within that discipline” (131), they are what enable us, she says, to “create a community in which we can figure out what we, individually and collectively, believe about our work” (135). In that rhetorical and political sense, theory is practice. But, as several of the authors in this volume (Ferry; Vandenberg; Howard) ask, whose “work” and whose interests define us and remain at the center of composition as a discipline? Can theory, research, and practice in ever new relationships intersect and hold an expanding community together or drive it apart into separate communities whose power and authority may be in jeopardy?

Composition’s calling into question its knowledge comes at a time when the authority of that expert knowledge may be at risk. In the wake of shrinking graduate programs and the responsibility-centered-management of academic departments in the new corporate universities, the literature components of some English departments are beginning to reclaim an expertise in the teaching of writing or, in some instances, to efface that expertise, deeming it no longer necessary, politically appropriate, or cost-effective.

Much composition scholarship in fact contributes to this withering away of the more public conception of composition. Our growing understanding of complex context-specific literacy practices runs counter to institutional conditions that assume composition is an essential set of transparent skills to be conveyed one-time-only to first year students by exploited instructors. If retooled writing courses do result from the disciplinary boundary crossing of compositionists into deconstruction, feminist, multicultural, and cultural studies, what in the experiences of teachers and students justifies or interrogates these theories in practice? How does interdisciplinary inquiry expand avenues and change how and what we research and teach? What locates theorists, courses, teachers, and programs that might grow from this research within “composition”? Several of the authors in this volume locate their concerns about composition’s “identity crisis” in a disjuncture between theory and pedagogy, whether questioning composition’s attempts to achieve more disciplinary status (Ferry; Vandenberg; Howard) or its failure to focus more attention on knowledge-building inside the field (MacDonald; Neff).
Composition research now includes not just historical, quantitative and qualitative “studies” of student writing but also local knowledge—teacher-talk, teacher-reflection, ethnographies of literacy practices in non-academic settings, and autoethnographies—which are viewed as politically empowering to both teachers and students (Mutnick; Yancey; Bishop). If lore is theory, then are all practitioners theorists? If engaged in reflective practice, is everyone a researcher? If there are composition “experts,” what is it that they know, how do they know it, and to what new and better uses will the discipline put the generalizable knowledge it makes?

While the views explored in this collection vary, they reflect a common charge: on what basis will we defend an expertise that is increasingly interdisciplinary if not post-disciplinary? In grappling with this question, each of the four sections in this book is designed to reverberate with the others but also to offer a somewhat sharper focus on a set of issues relevant to the overall theory/research/practice theme of the collection.

Part One, “Complicating the Research/Theory/Practice Relationship,” contains essays by Christopher Ferry, Peter Vandenberg, and James Zebroski. Each of these chapters, in its own way, examines the relationships between scholarship and teaching practices in the field. Christopher Ferry shows how “work” in composition, particularly what we call “practice,” is often abstracted from its material conditions. To remedy a field that has become “an unbalanced praxis” that focuses on theory at the expense of work, his Freirean “discontinuous continuum” allows for the valorization of work beyond the simple elevation of lore. Instantiating Ferry’s assumptions in the context of publication, Peter Vandenberg then examines the hierarchy of productivity in composition, one in which work is bifurcated into tangibles rewarded in the academic credit cycle (e.g., publication) and intangibles such as teaching. Reverberating with Vandenberg’s critique of the binary nature of scholarship and teaching, James Zebroski then rejects the assumption that theory informs practice by proposing a model of theorizing in which theory becomes one of several historically situated practices which develops only in a complex connection with signifying, teaching, curricular, and other practices.

Part Two, “Critiquing Theories in Practice,” extends the line of thought developed in Part One by examining in more detail the disjunctures between current theory and practice in particular educational contexts, calling into question new and old composition assumptions. In keeping with Vandenberg’s observation of the split that results from composition’s identification with postmodern scholarship, Rebecca Moore Howard, in an analysis of textbook representations of plagiarism, shows how even in the midst of new theorizing about the power of collaboration in writing, composition, struggling to deal with a “double consciousness,” remains true to the hierarchical values of autonomous authorship and reveals how its theories are more lay theories than disciplinary ones. Taking as his domain another area of strong theoretical influence on composition, David Seitz describes an ethnographic study of how
undergraduates, especially those of working class background, responded to a cultural studies agenda in a composition course. Seitz questions the extent to which composition studies, while claiming to privilege practice, actually allows practice to influence theoretical assumptions about identity and difference. The personal narrative, as one domain of practice, serves as the focal point for Deborah Mutnick’s essay in which she reconsiders theoretical assumptions about the role of personal narrative, distinguishing between uncritical expressivism and the conceptual narrative of scholars, researchers and students that subjects both writer and reader to conscious critique and suggesting, along with Seitz, that deeper issues of class and race underly the theoretical schism between process and social–epistemic approaches. Rounding out this section, Brian Huot and Michael Williamson read the field’s antipathy toward and distrust of assessment next to radical changes in assumptions about testing theory and practice. Instead of rejecting the practice of assessment, they believe compositionists need to realize that the present theoretical landscape allows the means for a shift in power from central to local stakeholders.

Part Three, “Refiguring and Relocating Research” examines research in the field by reconsidering assumptions and then by suggesting new relationships, sites for investigation, and connections with theory and practice. Susan Peck MacDonald begins this section by resuscitating empiricism from the stranglehold of postmodern indeterminacy. By comparing older, more positivistic assumptions about research with newer, more versatile conceptions, MacDonald argues for the importance of the concept of generalization in the field. One such extension in the realm of naturalistic inquiry is “grounded theory,” the centerpiece of Joyce Magnotto Neff’s contribution. Grounded theory extends the methodologies of naturalistic inquiry into more highly social and collaborative ways of working. The complicated collaborative and social roles of both “researchers” and “subjects” are taken up in the next two essays. Shirley Rose and Janice Lauer speculate on the obligations, risks, and dilemmas researchers face when they are committed to the enactment of feminist methodology in their work. Yuet-Sim Chiang extends the analysis by examining the western framework in which research in composition is conducted. Using examples of her own teaching, scholarship, and research, Chiang suggests ways in which constructs of race, color, and gender can transform the dialogue among researchers, theorists, and practitioners. In an attempt to understand and resolve some of the tensions arising from these configurations of stance and role, Ellen Cushman and Terese Guinsatao Monberg propose a new stance for research in which scholars reposition themselves in relation to others for whom they presume to speak. Susan Romano then comments on the shifts taking place as a result of the internet explosion. Drawing a distinction between textual production and rhetorical analysis, she proposes that we have not developed a legitimate space to raise questions about rhetorical education on computers, education in which analysis plays a much stronger role. Ruth Ray and Ellen Barton end this section by exploring research on the functions
of personal writing in nonacademic institutions, such as nursing homes. They argue that moving into such contexts causes composition researchers to identify and be challenged by their own biases and those of our profession (including the primacy of texts).

Part Four, “Remaking Knowledge and Rewriting Practice,” concludes the book with a critical examination of the ways in which new teacher/scholar/theorists are brought into the field. Wendy Bishop begins the section by examining the nature and functions of teacher talk (lore, story, narrative research, testimony, literacy autobiography). She dismisses the question of whether such talk creates knowledge and expertise, and instead explores how it does this and what the political and social implications are of valuing it. Kathleen Blake Yancey then moves the discussion into the context of a methods course in which the students are invited into a new way of experiencing the learning of teaching—as a process of lifelong reflection. Shifting the focus from learning communities to written representations of research, Nancy Maloney Grimm, Anne Frances Wysocki and Marilyn M. Cooper explore various strategies of representing scholarship (storytelling, multiple voices, hypertext, and multiply-authored texts). They critique the institutional resistance to these alternative modes. Gail Okawa brings the volume to a close by offering a representation of work with students and teachers of color, showing how elements of autobiographical narrative creates and mediates both representations of the self and a learning community.

In choosing and editing pieces for this volume, we have strengthened our belief that while never more self-critical, composition’s authority has never been stronger. We find a field willing to continually reconsider itself, to investigate difference and contradiction, to include research subjects beyond the composition classroom as agents, to use the local to call into question the general, to reflect on failure as well as success, to make new knowledge about composition in all three intersecting locations—theory, research and practice. We find disciplinary activity that continues to invite others into conversations that open up space for renewed and revised belief, critique, and change.

We would like to thank Art Young for his support of this project from the beginning and Michael Spooner, whose enthusiasm saw it through to the end. Thanks also to Alice Eads for her computer expertise and to our spouses Bill Rasch and Gean Anson, and our book-loving children, Alison Rasch, and Ian and Graham Anson. We dedicate this book to our fellow compositionists working at the intersections—may we keep one another from getting run over.